

FIRST
HISTORY LESSONS

THE PEOPLE
OF OUR COUNTRY

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First History Lessons: The People of our Country

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PRE-PARTITION INDIA

Showing Parts which became Pakistan after Partition



Source - <https://statelesshistories.org/article/transitional-statelessness-and-its-consequencesdrugs-disease-and-denial-of-care-for-refugees-in-the-new-state-of-pakistan>

1. In the Beginning

When the country was Partitioned all the way back in 1947, a winding border like a snake was drawn. The border ran through rivers, canals, hills—anything that came in the way. But do you think dividing all of this is easy? And so, many strange situations arose. Take, for instance, the village of Malopara, which stood right next to the border in Bangaon-Benapol. After the Partition, Bangaon was allotted to West Bengal, that is to say, to India, and Benapol, to East Bengal, that is to say, East Pakistan. Malopara fell on the Indian side. On one side of the village ran the river, and on the other, the international border. The villages across the river in India were much farther from Malopara than the villages in East Bengal on the other side of the border. Crossing the river and coming to India was a difficult proposition, so in times of trouble the people of Malopara turned to the villages in East Pakistan. Malopara may have become part of India after the Partition, but the daily lives of its people remained severed from India.

All of us know that the British ruled our country at one time. The country was partitioned in 1947 at the same time as it became independent. It had already been decided that independent India would be a democratic country. Which meant that everyone who was 21 or older would vote to elect its government. And that

elected government would run the country. Now, governing a country is no easy matter. It involves many rules and regulations, a set of laws. So the leaders at the top began to think about what these laws should be, how the new government should be formed, and other such matters. A country isn't just its government, its leaders and ministers and laws, after all. It is also its common people, its citizens. But take the people of Malopara—on paper they were Indians, but they had greater contact with East Pakistan. They were not quite Indians despite being Indians; on the other hand, they were not Pakistanis either. The discussions and debates, the arguments and counter-arguments about who were Indians and who were not began at that very time. In this book we will try to understand these discussions, and the laws that arose from them.

Until independence, all kinds of people would move to and from our country. But when the country became independent, British India was split into two countries—India and Pakistan. Hindu and Sikh refugees began to cross the border and move to India from the parts that had been allotted to Pakistan. Many Muslims also crossed the border, from India into Pakistan, though some of them returned later. But by the time they did, they found other people living in their houses.

There were many regional states in British India, and various Indian kings reigned over them. They were not under direct British rule. Hyderabad or Cooch Behar, for example. The citizens of these states would have to be considered too in the new arrangements. So discussions began about which country they would now belong to. Moreover, some parts of what is India today were ruled by the French and the Portuguese. Pondicherry or Goa, for instance. What about the people of those places? Then there were the Europeans who had been living in India for many generations under British rule. What's more, many people had gone from India to Burma or Ceylon or Malay on various kinds of work during British rule. How would they be made citizens after independence? These things had to be thought about as well.

So several complications arose over deciding who among this assortment of people were Indians and who were not. But as I said earlier, India is a democratic country, which means every citizen is supposed to have equal rights here. Following the tenets of democracy, the government instructed all the states on 15 March 1948 to prepare voters' lists as quickly as possible, so that everyone had the right to vote in time for the next elections. But having the right to vote on paper does not mean everyone is equal. This is what I will talk about at some length here.

First, let's understand the meaning of the word 'rights'. Think about it, everyone in your classroom is allowed to do the same things that you are. This means that your friends and you have equal rights. All of you can say whatever you think. All of you are given books and notebooks. All your names are listed for the mid-day meals. It isn't as though one of you gets something that another one doesn't. Then again, think about this too, that all of you have to obey the teachers and follow the rules of your school. This is how everyone is supposed to follow the same rules or laws in a country, and have the same rights.

But this is not at all how it turns out all the time. The leaders of a country often create laws that favour some people and cause difficulties for others. Sometimes, it even becomes difficult to formulate fair laws. To further their own interests, one group of citizens might refuse to acknowledge another group, and deny them benefits and opportunities. This group, then, tries to change the laws to suit their wishes. Sometimes, the government and its police forces harass the common people under the pretext of following the law. So equal rights are not always ensured for all citizens. We will read about quite a few such instances in this book.

The point is, who decided on these laws? There's no doubt that making laws is

a difficult task. Like other countries, our country has many laws to decide who is a citizen and who is not. These laws have been created at various times, and have also been changed many times. Let me tell you about some of them. Let's go back to the time of independence, when complications first arose over who would be considered Indians.





2. Partition

Although the country became independent in 1947, not all the laws were ready by then. After all, it takes time to do these things formally. This set of written laws that I am talking about is what constitutes the Constitution of the country. The Constitution is the book of all laws and principles. In it is written how the country will be run, and what rights its citizens have.

It took another two years or so after Independence for India's Constitution to be created. The work ended on 26 November 1949, and the Constitution came into effect two months later, on 26 January 1950. India was declared a republic, where the people—the public—would choose the leaders who would govern the country. These people were the citizens of India. And so the Constitution was completed, and preparations began for elections. But the common people had not yet recovered from the shocks of the Partition. They were not the ones who had drawn the borders, but they were the ones whose lives had been thrown into turmoil. With the country having been partitioned according to religion, the violence that followed was also based on religion. These clashes had begun before the Partition, and they did not stop at all after it. People began crossing the border to save themselves from these riots. Disputes continued over which

country various groups of people belonged to. In Punjab, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs went across the border in both directions, as they did in Bengal. But the movements were of different kinds in Punjab and Bengal. In Punjab, violent clashes broke out at the time of the Partition. So Muslims left for Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs for India, as quickly as possible, in order to save their lives. The movement of refugees in Punjab could be said to have stopped in about three years. The governments of the two countries had made arrangements for their migration as far as possible. In India, the government took responsibility right from the beginning for those who had crossed the border into Indian Punjab. All the Hindus and Sikhs who moved there were considered citizens of India.

But the government took a different route for Bengal. Here, the Hindus moved to West Bengal, and the Muslims, to east Bengal. Both sides of the border saw an avalanche of people who had lost their homes. The government took a decision early on to be responsible only for those refugees who had moved to India within a year of the Partition—but not for those who came afterwards. So a date was fixed, and it was announced that those who had moved before the end of July 1948 would be considered citizens of India. Those who came after this would have to register themselves separately. Not that this stopped the movement of people. How could it, since violence under the pretext of religious

differences persisted? Large groups of refugees continued to pour into West Bengal years after the Partition. Meanwhile, the government was unwilling to let so many people stay on permanently. So these people were not given the rights that citizens have, to live anywhere in the country, to travel anywhere, to earn a livelihood. Still people stayed on, some of them finding their own way to secure work and build or get a home. Camps were built for those refugees who had no money or help or resources. The more these refugees gathered around railway stations and in streets, the more the government sent them off to those distant camps.

These camps were enclosed spaces where the refugees were housed. The government kept watch on them in these places. They were told that they couldn't leave the camps or work outside without permission. Many rules and restrictions were imposed on them. Often, not all the members of a family that had crossed over found shelter in the same camp. Separate camps were set up for widows and orphaned, unmarried women. Our society frequently considers women weak and vulnerable. The government thought the same way, that these women who were alone would not be able to take care of themselves. That they would depend on the government all their lives. So special arrangements were made for them. If they had children with them, there were a number of rules for them too.

Once the boys grew up a little, they were shifted from their mothers' camps to other ones. It was decided that, as soon as the young men began to earn, they would have to take care of their respective families. Men and women were given different kinds of work at the camps. Just imagine, how different the rights were within the same country. Many more borders sprang up around the first one. It was something like this: you cross the border to enter another country, then find yourself confined within the borders of a camp. Like a country within a country. And the government didn't look after all the refugees in the same way either. All of them were in the same country, facing the same problems, but different arrangements were made for different groups.

And it wasn't as though this was the only complication. It would so happen that some Muslims would cross the border and enter Pakistan whenever riots broke out here, and then return when things had become calmer. Many Hindus also sought shelter in East or West Bengal, depending on where violence broke out. The government was in a quandary over them. No one wanted to accept them as citizens, and leaders were locked in bitter dispute over them. Some said, since you left the country, you cannot live as you did before even if you've come back. Others said, they didn't leave out of choice, they were forced to leave because of the violence. Meanwhile other people had occupied their land and houses. So

these people were in deep trouble when they returned. Although the government never said so in as many words, it was not keen on bringing them back. So although all Indians became citizens on paper after the British left, there was great controversy over who actually was Indian and who was not. And at the root of it lay the Partition, the violence and the cross-border movement of people trying to save their lives.

Refugee Registration Card

Book No- ৭১১

Registration No - বি.৪১ Date - ১/১১/৫০ Place- বান্ধা ০

Name (Head of the family)- অক্ষয় সেন Caste - ব

Present Address- ১৬/১১/১২৮৮ PO- জয়পুর

Village or town- চন্দ্রনাথ পোতা

Date of Departure - ৫/১০/৫০

Date of Arrival in Indian Union - ৭/১০/৫০

Date of Reporting to any Govt. Camp - ১/১১/৫০

Past Occupation কৃষক Present Occupation

Total Member in the Family - Name & Age

পার্বতী/সান ৩০ জ্যোতিন সেন ২২ শিউরি সেন ৮



3. Laws

Amidst all the chaos, the first general elections in independent India took place in 1951–52, following the guidelines laid down by the Constitution. People voted in these elections. And then the Citizenship Act came into force in 1955. Which means that the right to vote in independent India had come into force even before a law governing citizenship was instituted. After all, only those who are citizens have the right to vote. So this means that even before the citizenship law was formulated, the people of India were still its citizens. The formal existence of the law meant that specific dates would be used to identify who was a citizen of India and who was not. The law of 1955 said that those who were born in India were citizens of India. This law, however, has been amended many times since then. New sections have been added in 1986, 2003, 2005, 2015 and 2019. Through each of these changes, the government has determined afresh whom not to accept as citizens. And because of this, some people have been left out every time. In 1986, the government modified the law to announce that those born in India between 26 January 1950 and 1 July 1987 would be automatically considered Indian citizens. The law would be different for those born in India after that period. In their case, the citizenship of their parents would be taken into account to determine whether they would be considered Indian citizens or not.

Sometime before 1986, there was a major change in the map of the Indian subcontinent. In 1971, Pakistan split into two countries, with East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh. As a result of the war and violence during this division, many residents of East Bengal began to cross the border once more and enter the states of eastern India. Once again, a large number of people became homeless. This migration simply wouldn't stop—for years on end, people kept coming across the border in search of sanctuary. The government of our country decided that this inflow had to be stopped. Accordingly, they decided that not all the descendants of those who had entered India at different points of time could be given citizenship. This is why the 1955 law was amended in 1986. And then there was a separate set of rules for Assam. I'll come to those later.

The law changed again in 2003. This time it was said that those who were born after 4 December 2004 would be Indian citizens only if both their parents were Indian. If not, at least one of them would have to be Indian, and the other must not be an infiltrator. Who were these infiltrators? To understand this, let's go back once more to the time of the Partition. We will return to the changing law after that.



4. Infiltrators

There was no Bangladesh or Pakistan before the Partition. So people could go anywhere they liked within British India. This free movement was stopped after the Partition. The people on either side of the borders turned into foreigners for one another. But those who lived near the border, they tried to come and go as before. What could they do after all, their friends and neighbours, their favourite shops and markets often turned out to be on the other side. As I have said before, the riots forced many people to leave their own country and start life in another. Initially, the government had assumed the border crossings would not go on for very long, but it turned out there was no end to the number of people travelling across the borders from both sides. The greatest problems were faced by those Muslims who went to Pakistan because of the violence during the Partition but then, for various reasons, returned to India. The government viewed them with suspicion from the very beginning. Ministers and bureaucrats were worried—had they returned only in search of a livelihood or to go back to their homes, or were they coming back as Pakistani spies? This is why the government would not accept all of them as citizens. They could not be considered refugees, for they were returning to their own country. Thus, they became illegal people in the government's books. In official terms, they were infiltrators—who had come

in from another country but were neither refugees nor in possession of entry permits. According to the government, their very act of entering India was illegal. If the government managed to catch them, it punished them, even tried to send them back.

A different problem arose in some other places. When the refugees came across the border from East Bengal, they began living in new places in India. And many of the older residents of those places became angry. They feared the refugees would grab their land. For instance, some Bengali Hindu refugees who crossed the border into Tripura started displacing the original residents. Such things had in fact taken place in Tripura not just after the Partition but also earlier, in the British era. Bengalis had at various times pushed out the original residents of the state and built their own houses on that land. The Bengalis were better educated, so the British government used their services and was unwilling to evict them. As a result, the original residents of Tripura have always been angry with the Bengalis. When Hindu Bengalis began to enter in large numbers after the Partition, the new Indian government was forced to give the matter some serious thought. Angering the original residents would make it difficult to win elections. So the government formulated laws that made it difficult for refugees to come into the country. Some of them were told that they had committed an illegal act by coming to India. So they too became infiltrators—those who had

broken the law and forced their way in. Not only in Tripura but in all the border states, the government and the people of those states grew deeply concerned with identifying infiltrators. This word is often heard today in West Bengal, Assam and other states that share a border with Bangladesh.

Infiltrators are different from refugees, mind you. The government would have made arrangements for board and lodging for anyone it recognized as a refugee. But when it did not consider someone a refugee, it decided to send them back or punish them, on the assumption that they were infiltrators. Reading the history of our country shows how the drawing of the borders has led to citizens losing their rights every now and then. Someone who was an Indian all their life suddenly becomes an infiltrator.





We are all
Indians

The illustration depicts five individuals of various ethnicities and religions standing in a row, holding a large white banner. From left to right: a man with a mustache in a green kurta and white dhoti; a woman in a pink sari; a man with a beard and a white turban in a yellow kurta and green dhoti with black patterns; a woman in a pink sari; and a man with a beard and a blue turban in a blue kurta and orange dhoti. They are all barefoot. The background is a solid pink color, and the entire scene is framed by a decorative border of green leaves and red roses on a yellow background.

5. The Citizenship Law of 2019 or CAA

In 2019, the government talked of changing the citizenship law yet again. There are rules to be followed when amending a law. Laws are made or amended in the national Parliament or in the Assemblies of various states. First a proposal for changes is made, which is known as the Bill. After a majority of Members of Parliament or Assembly have passed it, it becomes a law or an Act. It was a Bill like this that was converted into an Act in December 2019. The law is known as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA for short. The words may sound difficult, but the meaning is simple enough. Citizenship refers to who may be considered an Indian, and Amendment means change. The CAA decreed that if people belonging to six specific religious groups have come into India from Bangladesh, Pakistan or Afghanistan and begun living here before 31 December 2014, they will be considered citizens of India. These six religious groups are Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian. You must be surprised that only three specific countries were mentioned, and that Muslims were left out entirely? It's natural to be surprised—and many were, in fact, very surprised. In response to their questions, the government stated that the majority of the people in those countries were Muslims. Whenever riots and violence broke out,

it was people of other religions who had run away from those countries to India, seeking shelter. But the Muslims had no such fears, they had no reason to leave. The government argued that the Muslims had no need to cross the border unless they feared for their lives. But that isn't entirely true. There can be many reasons for crossing a border—floods, storms or droughts, for instance. Moreover, it isn't as though no Muslim fears for their life in Muslim-majority countries. Muslim society is also divided. In Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, the majority sect of Sunni Muslims often oppress and harass minority sects like Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims. And then there's Myanmar, another neighbour of India's. Many Muslims there have crossed the border from there into Bangladesh because of violence; some have come to India too. So it is clear that it is not all right to include only three countries and six religious groups. The fact is that the government of this country has been in the habit of suspecting Muslims right from the beginning, right from the time of Partition. And this law has been written keeping in mind that same suspicion.

The Muslims of India began to feel a sense of fear after the citizenship law of 2019 was enacted. They wondered what would happen to them if they were unable to show their papers, their parents' papers, all their deeds and documents.

How would they explain that they were citizens, and not infiltrators? How many of us preserve our old documents carefully? So many Muslims have been living in our country all these years—it is entirely possible that some of their parents are dead, or that there are no papers pertaining to births and deaths in the family. How are they to prove they are citizens of India and have not illegally entered from other countries? They were gripped by fear: What if they were asked to leave the country in case they couldn't produce their papers? Many others in the country felt it was an unjust law, a law that should not be followed.

From December 2019, protest movements began in different parts of the country. Agitations were underway. Students as well as common people of all ages joined the protests. In the extreme cold of December, a group of women started a protest in a Delhi neighbourhood named Shaheen Bagh. There were several elderly women among them, one of whom was named Bilkis Dadi. She was 82, but was not to be subdued by the winter cold. She emphasized that she was doing this for future generations. It wouldn't do to be afraid. Like many others, she began to live in a tent on the main road in Shaheen Bagh, and refused to budge. She would fight as fearlessly as the Rani of Jhansi, she said. On 26 January, our Republic Day, Bilkis Dadi raised the Indian flag along with many

others. All of them were trying to convey the fact that everyone in a republic should have the same rights, and no government should take them away.

Year	What Was Said
1955	● Those born in India are citizens of India. ● Even those born abroad can be Indian citizens if their parents are Indian. ● Those who are Indian by family can apply to the government for citizenship. ● People from other countries who are not infiltrators and have been living here for a long time can apply to become citizens.
1986	Those born in India between 26 January 1950 and 1 July 1987 are citizens of India.
2003	Those born in India after 4 December 2004 can be citizens of India if both their parents are Indian, or if one is Indian and the other is not an infiltrator.

2005	From now on, the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order, 1964, will be used to determine whether a resident of Assam is a citizen of India.
2015	Rules were formed to determine who among those Indians who live outside the country can be considered citizens of India.
2019	The Citizenship (Amendment) Act comes into effect.



6. The National Register of Citizens or NRC

At the same time as the uproar over the CAA, another term began to be heard often around the country. The NRC, or the National Register of Citizens. This is a list which was first proposed for Assam in 2003. When the citizenship law was amended that year, the government said a list would have to be prepared to determine who were citizens and who were not. It took several years to begin work on this, and in some places the work stopped because of people's objections. Finally, the actual preparation of the list began in 2013, and it was published in 2019.

You must be wondering why this step was taken specially for Assam. I'm coming to that. But first let me talk about this citizens' register. When there was a controversy raging about the CAA, the government began to say that similar lists would have to be prepared for the rest of the country. When the list for Assam came out in 2019, it was discovered that many people had been left out of it. They included Hindus as well as Muslims. These people were suddenly told that they did not belong to the place, the country, where they had lived for several generations. None of the rights enjoyed by citizens remained with them. You could say they had no country of their own anymore. Think about it, can a country where I have no rights as a citizen be mine anymore? Meanwhile, they were not citizens of other countries either. Now

imagine the number of people who would be in trouble if something similar were to be done all across the country.

Now, let me explain the method for preparing this list. The NRC is compiled on the basis of another list, the National Population Register, or NPR. As the names suggest, these are two separate lists. The NPR is prepared by going house to house and collecting data. It includes not only citizens but also those whom the government will not acknowledge as citizens. In simple terms, the word population refers to everyone living in the country, whether they are citizens or foreigners. So the second the list of citizens created out of this NPR, using documents for verification, is the NRC. Just as everyone was becoming terrified about the CAA, the government declared its intention to create a new nationwide NPR. And then, on its basis, the NRC. This meant there would be a list across the country, like in Assam, which would include everyone's names, their parents' names, where they live, and so on. And without documents to prove all of these, there would be trouble. Those without any papers would have their citizenship questioned. This is why those who said, like Bilkis Dadi, that they did not want CAA in the country also agitated against the introduction of the NPR and NRC.



7. Assam

In 1971, the country of Pakistan was split into two, leading to the creation of Bangladesh. East Pakistan and West Pakistan were effectively at war with each other before that. Those living in the east wanted their own country. A lot of people lost their homes in the ensuing unrest, and many of them arrived in Assam. You only have to look at the atlas to see why. States like Assam, Tripura and West Bengal lay just across the border, so getting there was easy. And besides, many of them already knew someone or other in Assam, and so, following the thread of that connection, that is where they came.

I should tell you now that the custom of counting the population every ten years and making lists of various kinds has been in practice from the British era. This is known as the census. It tells us how many people live in India, what languages they speak, what their professions are, who among them live in villages and who in cities, which caste or tribe they belong to. There was a countrywide census in 1951, and a list of citizens was created in Assam based on that. Ever since the British era, the people of Assam have been apprehensive

of outsiders coming in to grab their jobs and land and houses. They have been particularly anxious about the Bengalis. The worry that educated Bengalis will take away their jobs, and Bengali farmers will take away their land is an old one in Assamese society. It flared up during the Partition, when refugees from East Bengal began to pour into the state. So, preparations began to prepare a list of citizens in Assam. Those efforts did not last long, but the idea came up again after Bangladesh became independent in 1971. The government would use this list to determine who would be considered a citizen and who an infiltrator. As I have said before, every new list means some people being left out of the ranks of citizens. And that was just what happened. But then, lists like these cannot be drawn up overnight. By the time the process began, those who had crossed the border in 1971 had been living in Assam for several years with their families.

All these things led to serious trouble in Assam in the 1980s. A group of students began a protest movement, stating that those who had come from other countries must never be given room in Assam. They demanded that these people be sent back. Now, what do you suppose the government did in

this situation? On the one hand, it reasoned that if so many people could be given voting rights at one go, they would be so happy that they would vote for the ruling party in the next election. On the other hand, so much trouble had erupted over the whole thing that something simply had to be done. So the government passed a law in 1983, stating that special arrangements would be made for Assam. It would have to be determined who the foreigners were. Not everyone would be allowed to stay on as citizens. In every case, what the neighbours said would be considered. That is, people would be investigated on the basis of complaints from their neighbours. But does anyone willingly complain against their neighbours, with whom they have had lived and dealt with for years? So what happened was that no one was eliminated through this process. And everyone's interests were protected.

But grievances and resentments that had piled up over so many years could hardly be dismissed so easily. Those who suspected that outsiders had entered Assam were not willing to give up their fight. They kept saying that they alone had the right to live in Assam, that all the rest were infiltrators—they would have to go back. And so the tug of war with those people continued. So did protests

against the 1983 law. Legal cases began, and in 2005, the courts ruled that law would not do. No amount of legislation could solve the problem. Meanwhile, the government changed. Eventually, work began on a new list in 2013, and it was released on 31 August 2019. This was the NRC which you have just read about. Because there had been a long-standing problem in Assam over who were citizens and who were infiltrators, it was decided to have the first NRC in this state. But the number of people left out of the list was beyond count. Now think about the fact that those who had been omitted would not be able to stay on in their own country as citizens. They became foreigners in their own land. The government declared that those not on the list were not citizens of India. Which meant that these omitted individuals turned into infiltrators in the eyes of the government—people who had entered India illegally. They no longer had the freedom to move about freely. The government created detention camps for them, where they would be kept in confinement. These are different from the refugee camps you've read about earlier. People got shelter and support in refugee camps, however little it might have been. But taking anyone to a detention camp is a form of punishment. Detention camps have

come up in Assam already, and are also being set up in Delhi, Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab and Rajasthan.





8. Gangadhar's Story

So much for the law. As you can realize, the government makes all sorts of laws, but it's the common people who get into trouble. This was precisely the kind of trouble Gangadhar Pramanik was plunged into. He was from Radhanagar in Bankura district of West Bengal, from where he had gone to Assam in search of work. People travel long distances in search of a living, surely there's no problem with that. Gangadhar worked in a hotel, saving money to send back home. Meanwhile, the Assam government suspected him of being a foreigner and asked for his papers. He had left his village in West Bengal a long time ago, and had no papers to prove his story. Because he couldn't show any documents, the government assumed he was not an Indian citizen. He was taken to a detention camp. As you know, a citizen of one country needs specific documents to enter another one—they cannot come and go without a passport and a visa. They have to inform the authorities which country they belong to, and they need entry permits and proof of citizenship. But do you need documents to go from one part of your country to another? Surely, all of you have travelled from one village to another, or one city to another. Have you ever had to produce documents? However, you would surely have had to produce them if you went abroad. Now

Gangadhar was in trouble, for people assumed he was a citizen of Bangladesh, and had come to India without permission. No one was willing to listen to him. How was Gangadhar to prove he was an Indian citizen? He hadn't carried any documents when he left home. He hadn't imagined he would need them. It's not as though everyone has documents, anyway. Gangadhar had lived in the same place since his birth before going to Assam, and he had assumed this was good enough by way of evidence. But now he had been labelled a foreigner in his own country. He started passing his days in the detention camp in Goalpara in Assam, and began to think he would never return home. Finally, some well-wishers tracked him down four years later and rescued him. After a great deal of effort, they managed to ensure he could go home. So we have to realize that all citizens do not always have the same rights. The government often harasses poor people under the pretext of following the law, especially if it's someone like Gangadhar, who travelled to a different place in search of work.



9. Hasina Bhanu

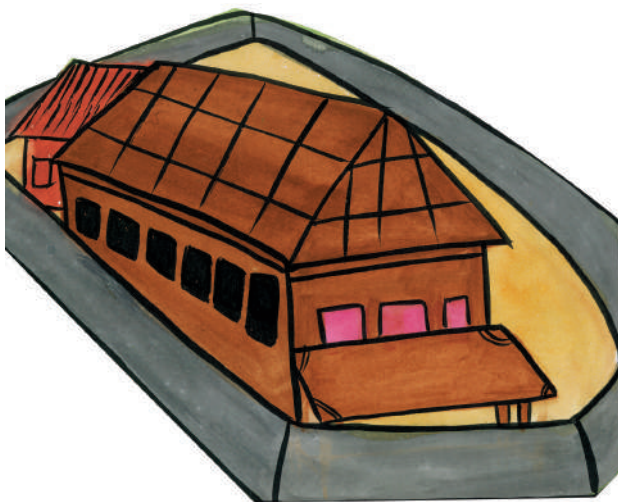
Many people have been in this kind of trouble over their lack of documents. They are thought to be Bangladeshis who have entered India illegally, and they spend years trying to convince the authorities that they are in fact citizens of India. You have read about Gangadhar and the four years it took him to do this. Now let me tell you about Hasina Bhanu. She's a resident of Assam, but, like many others, she too fell victim to the suspicion of being a foreigner.

Whenever anyone is suspected of this in Assam, a problem arises over whether they can be allowed to vote. After all, only citizens have that right. So anyone under a cloud of suspicion is referred to as a 'doubtful voter' or 'D-Voter'. This was how Hasina Bhanu entered the list of suspected infiltrators. The first time her status was questioned was in 1997. She submitted all her papers then. Not just she but also her parents and grandparents had their names on the voters' lists. She was accepted as a citizen in 2016 on the basis of these documents. But then, five years later, the Assam border police began to suspect her once

more. She was labelled a foreigner all over again and taken to the detention camp, which was in a section of Tezpur Jail. Many others like her were kept in confinement there. Hasina spent nearly two months with them, away from her home. She fell ill, and was wracked by worry. Finally her papers were found, proving that she had been born in the Borpheta district of Assam. When still a child, she moved with her father to Dalgaoon district, where later she married Ayen Ali. They had six children. It was clear she was from Assam. Hasina was finally released, but how was she to forget that terrifying time? She never recovered, neither physically nor mentally. Now she guards her documents fiercely. She lacks the strength for any housework. Her son Abbas Ali is only 18, but the entire responsibility for the household is his since his mother is ill. He had moved to Bengaluru with a job, but when he was told his mother had been taken to a detention camp, he gave up everything to return home and take care of things there.

You can tell from reading about Gangadhar and Hasina how long some people have to fight to be acknowledged as the citizens of the country, how many years

the battle goes on. These battles are particularly visible in the areas around the borders. News of what goes on there does not often reach the rest of the country. Let's now look at the situation around our borders.





10. Borders

You already know that when borders are drawn between two countries, people usually need a special kind of permission to cross them. These permissions are needed just for people to come and go across, but also for things to be bought and sold. One of the greatest tasks of those who lead countries is to ensure that this buying and selling goes on smoothly, and that they can collect taxes from the activity. This needs a great deal of planning. When India and Pakistan became two countries, they needed new plans for trade. The same thing had to be done when Pakistan and Bangladesh became separate countries. But every time a conflict breaks out between the countries, trade between them come under pressure too. Whenever India and Pakistan clash over Kashmir, trade between the two countries takes a beating. Each one believes that asserting its will at the border will mean teaching the other one a lesson. But applying force isn't as easy as it sounds. News of decisions taken by the leaders of the country does not always reach the borders in time. The borders may be drawn by the leaders, but think about what it means to suddenly lay down a line between two countries. The land and the rivers remain just as they were. Consider the Himalaya mountains in the north. Borders have been drawn through them as well. And so

problems keep arising between India and its neighbours, Pakistan and China, with someone claiming one segment and someone else claiming another. The dispute is unending. You can imagine the kind of trouble this means for those who live close to the borders.

What might happen when borders are drawn is that the road connecting two places in one country ends up passing through the other. Then the two countries sign an agreement that allows the people of one country to use this road even though it is in the other country. As I said, draw the border wherever you like, but you cannot apply force every time. Let me tell you about such a case. In 1947, after the country was partitioned, a place in Bengal named Santahar became part of East Pakistan. Now, the potatoes that used to be sent from Assam to the markets of Calcutta would pass through Santahar. In July 1948, the West Bengal government wrote to the Pakistan government asking for permission for an officer from its agriculture department to be posted at Santahar railway station. The officer would be able to keep an eye on various aspects of the potato trade. The railway department was informed accordingly. You will be astonished to know what emerged from this. It turned out there was already an Indian officer in Santahar Station, from a time before 1947. Neither of the two governments

in question had realized this. The Pakistan government had not permitted him to remain, and the West Bengal government had asked for permission because it had no idea of his existence. Who allowed him to stay on, then? No one had an answer. This means that whenever specific needs arise in the areas around the borders, the people who are in charge locally usually take steps on the spot.

And here we were, thinking of borders as solid, permanent things. Governments always want borders to be strengthened. Only then can they demonstrate how powerful they are. This is why the rules of cross-border trade between countries are often modified. The list of items prohibited from being sold to the other country is changed frequently. But it's clear that not every change in rules is conveyed in time to the people who actually live near the border. And they get into trouble by breaking the new rules unknowingly. The government is itself not aware of where its people live near the border or what they do. Trade and business cannot go on the way it used to before the border was created. Rules are imposed not just on buying and selling, but also on the movement of people. It is by imposing new laws that the government decides who an Indian is and who, a foreigner, who a citizen is and who is not. The regular life of people living near the borders changes suddenly. So if we imagine laws are made keeping in mind

the welfare of citizens, that isn't correct. In areas where the news of changes in the law doesn't even reach people on time, it would be wrong to assume that citizens have the same rights as every other citizen in the rest of the country. But the people lead their daily lives as they have to, staying out of sight of the government. Their dealings with people around them continue, no matter which country these people belong to. There is no choice.

By now you must have realized that not all citizens can live in freedom with the same rights. Under the pressure of government policies, different groups of people in different places end up living in different ways. Very often the government, or other citizens with power, decide who will be given what rights and when, and from whom rights will be taken away. And the law is often changed to achieve this. While the government tries to strengthen the border, the people of the country have to continuously prove that they have always lived on the right side of the border. Of course, some have to do it more than others, while others don't have to do it at all. Ever since the Partition, many people in our country have been deprived of citizens' rights thanks to the use of labels like 'refugee', 'foreigner' or 'infiltrator'. The common people have been fighting against such laws constantly, and been punished for it too. Meanwhile, as you can see, those who live near the borders continue to make their own arrangements,

as they always have. The government, of course, tries to make laws to maintain its power, but people often have to look after their own interests. Reading their stories will show that this history is not uniform, that it is not a straight line. It's as though a giant filtering machine is always chasing the people in order to remove some of them. 1947, 1955, 1971, 1986, 2003, 2005, 2015, 2019—the tale of papers and documents as evidence for the ordinary citizen appears unending. Citizenship and its filtering mechanisms pose the hardest tests in these people's lives. It's easy to be trapped in the filter. It is our collective task, the responsibility of every citizen, to ensure that this filtering mechanism doesn't put the people of the country in trouble.



11. And Finally

You may be wondering how I got to know all the stories I've been telling you. Perhaps you think they're all made up. But that's not true. Let me tell you how I gathered the information from various sources. For instance, I learnt of Malopara from the renowned historian Willem van Schendel's book *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation on South Asia*. I found out about Santahar in the same book.

I got to know a great deal about Assam from social scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal's book, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History*. It taught me a lot about citizenship laws too.

Gangadhar's story was published in several newspapers. Let me give you the name of one of them, you can read it for yourself. It came out in the 16 September 2021 issue of The Telegraph. Newspapers can be read on the internet too these days, so let me give you the link, so that you can read it when you have the time and opportunity: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/bengal-workers-plight-at-transit-camp-in-assam/cid/1830904>.

I found out about Hasina Bhanu from a newspaper which can be read directly on the internet, it's named 'Article 14'. The news came out on 12 January 2022. Let me give you the link to this piece as well: <https://www.article-14.com/post/assam->

s-hasina-bhanu-won-a-20-year-legal-battle-to-prove-she-was-indian-it-came-at-a-cost-61de5ba1bd80d.

Several other books came to use too. The one from which I learnt a great deal about the arrangements for elections after Independence, and the way rules began to be set for citizens, is by a historian named Ornit Shani. The title of the book is *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise*.

As you can understand, nothing may be said casually in a history book. Various other papers, documents, books by experts, newspapers, and so on have to be consulted. Nothing can be believed just because someone has said it. Not even if they say it often. Only after validation and judgement can what is being said be transferred from the ear to the mind.



Many people have helped me write this book. They have pointed out mistakes and suggested better ways to write it. I must specially mention Subhash Ranjan Chakraborty, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Kritika Sengupta, Shouvik Bandyopadhyay, Achin Chakraborty, Semanti Ghosh, Manabi Majumdar, Sabir Ahamed, Priyankar Dey, Uponita Mukherjee, Supurna Banerjee, Paramita Chakraborty, Madhumita Basu, Amitava Gupta, Arshi Parveen Gupta, Raisha Mahmood, Mohar Sengupta, Aishi Dutta, Rupkatha, Anwesha Sengupta and Debarati Bagchi. I am grateful to all of them.

We are grateful to Sunandini Banerjee for her comments on the English translation. We thank Sohini Sengupta for copyediting the book.



About the Author, Translator and the Artists

Tista Das is the author of this book. She teaches history at Bankura University, West Bengal.

Arunava Sinha has translated this book into English. He is a literary translator and co-director of the Ashoka Centre for Translation at Ashoka University.

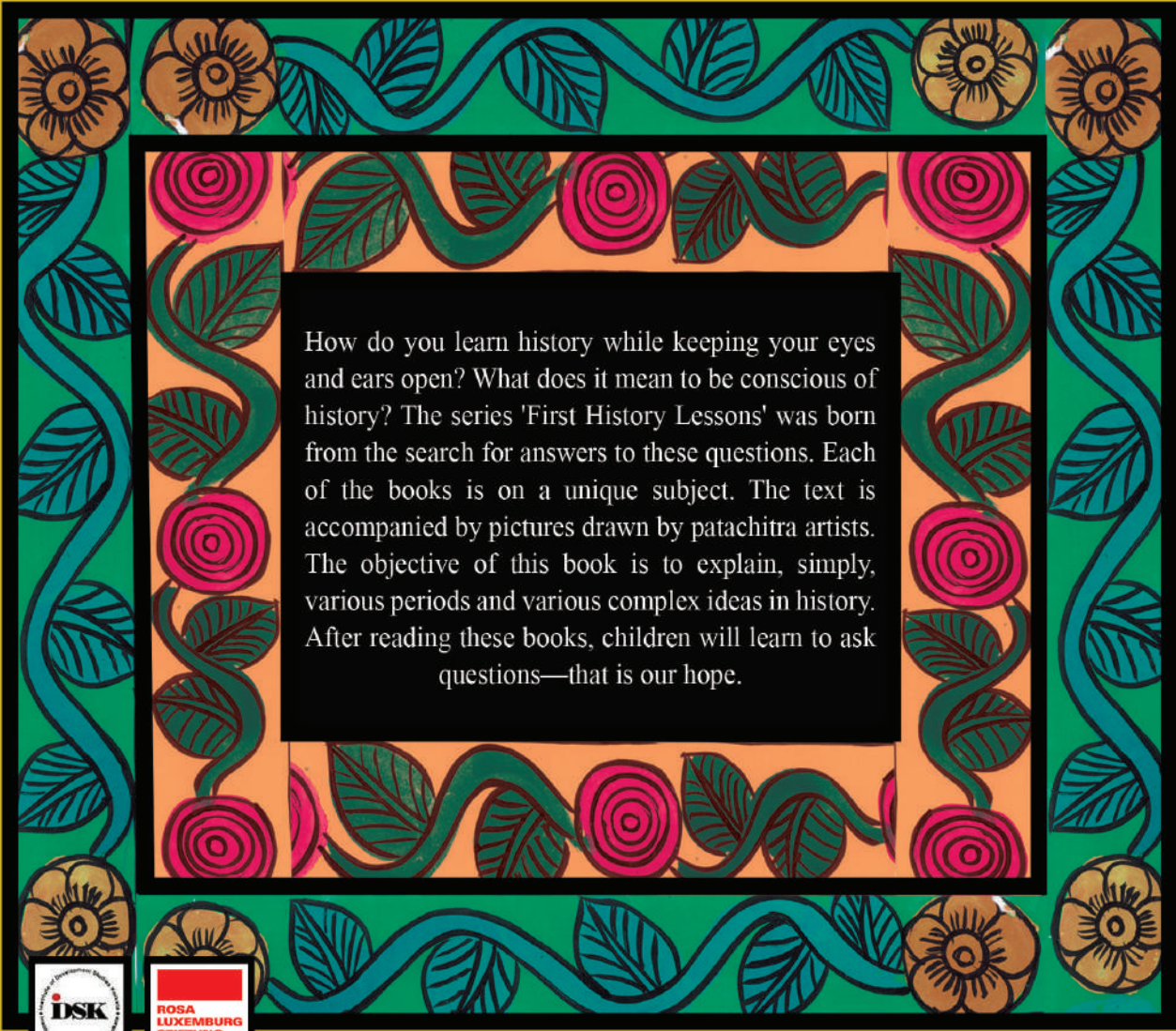
Wasim Helal has done the art direction, cover and maps for this book. He is a graphic designer by profession. Wasim does illustrations, covers, and art direction for many Indian and foreign publishers.

The illustrations within this book are by Ranjit Chitrakar and Sirajudaulla Chitrakar. By family tradition they are pata artists—those who make art on fabric. Ranjit and Shiraz work in the village of Naya, which is under the jurisdiction of Pingla police station in the West Medinipur district of West Bengal. Following the tradition of pata art, they primarily paint narratives and compose songs about Hindu gods and goddesses. But these days their art covers other themes too. Pata art is an example of the tradition of religious harmony in Bengal. Although the artists are often Muslims, their art and lyrics are usually centred on stories of Hinduism. What's more, according to their own social narrative, they are descendants of the Hindu god Viswakarma. This is how Islam and Hinduism are blended in their lives and work.



The **Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK)** was set up in 2002 by the Government of West Bengal as an autonomous centre of excellence in social sciences. It is a society with an autonomous governing body with eminent scholars and Government's nominees. IDSK is recognized for its advanced academic research and informed policy advice in the areas of literacy, education, health, gender, employment, technology, communication, human sciences and economic development. The academic programmes at IDSK include MPhil (2006-2022) and PhD in social sciences and short training courses for research scholars. It offers state-of-the-art IT and library facilities to its students and research scholars. It is fully funded by the Government of West Bengal. IDSK has been recognized by the ICSSR under the category of "ICSSR Recognized Research Institutes".

The **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS)** is a German political foundation that is part of the democratic socialist movement. True to the legacy of its namesake Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), it stands in solidarity with the workers' and women's rights movements. The organization serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as research centre for social development. The RLS has close ties to the German party DIE LINKE. RLS provides political education and a centre for advanced social research in both Germany and throughout the world. RLS is one of six party-affiliated political foundations in Germany; it supports partners in over 80 countries striving for social justice, strengthening public participation, and social ecological development.



How do you learn history while keeping your eyes and ears open? What does it mean to be conscious of history? The series 'First History Lessons' was born from the search for answers to these questions. Each of the books is on a unique subject. The text is accompanied by pictures drawn by patachitra artists. The objective of this book is to explain, simply, various periods and various complex ideas in history. After reading these books, children will learn to ask questions—that is our hope.

